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Romanticism in a Season of Scarcity:  
Hunger and Anger at the End of the Moral Economy

For my talk, I'd like to engage the issue of food scarcity through the changing image of the food riot. The following pages are intended to provide a brief general background on the history of the scarce years in England in the 1790s, as well as to focus on some of the issues connected with food rioting around this time. I've uploaded the short primary texts (by Hannah More, John Thelwall, and William Wordsworth) that I will be discussing in more detail (and more informally) when we meet on October 4. I welcome your insights and input, and look forward to meeting you all.

This is a condensed version of a piece that is currently under consideration; please do not circulate without prior permission.

In *The Ruined Cottage* (c. 1798), Wordsworth begins the story of Margaret's personal catastrophe with "two blighting seasons / When the fields were left with half a harvest" (Butler D, 153). While Margaret presumably does not die of starvation, she certainly suffers from some kind of attrition, and her decline is marked by the natural environment's gradual encroachment on her cottage. Such blighting seasons—harvest failures, food shortages, and the social turmoil that typically erupted in the wake of such crises—occurred with some frequency during the Romantic period, affecting all of the major crops, and sending food prices soaring. The food crises that I will be discussing, which occurred in the years 1795 and 1800, should interest Romanticists for a number of reasons. First, they inspired a sustained and vigorous print discourse on scarcity that flourished in the years just before Malthus' *Principle of Population* (1798) gained ascendancy in British policy and later, in the environmental movements of the twentieth

century. Second, they disclose a nature that is overtly political, not a site of aesthetic pleasure or transcendence, but of provision. It is a nature, in other words, that is populated and with, and mediated by workers and tradesmen in the food trade, laboring to feed themselves and the nation, both in the present and in the future. The 1790s writers on food scarcity are distinct from those who wrote on scarcities earlier in the century because they link the problem of provision to the momentous revolutionary events of the decade; in other words, food scarcity – and food riot – reads differently at the end of the eighteenth century than it does earlier. At the same time, these writings disclose the moment when climate and politics collided to help fuel the transition from a moral to a market economy.

What I am identifying as scarcity literature has generally been categorized as part of an emerging literature on political economy, particularly as it bears on the topics of the Corn Laws, free trade, and the enclosure of land. Sometimes, this material is categorized as part of the political, reformist literature of the period. However, to the extent that scarcity formed the immediate backdrop of these topics, these writings possess an interest of their own. The debate about the scarcity was vigorous and multigeneric. Many commentators adopted colorful pseudonyms such as “Painboeuf,” “Friend to his Country,” “A Philanthropic Butcher,” “Citizen Famine,” and “An Enemy to War and Starvation.” Authors often responded to or cited one another, and political affiliations often do not line up with traditional Jacobin/anti-Jacobin binaries that we tend to associate with British romanticism. Scarcity conditions – and proposals for their relief – were a daily subject in newspapers in 1795 and again in 1800, and the major magazines regularly reviewed the many books published on the subject, even the books that appear

to be minor, local productions. As a crisis that was intensely mediated, as much *read* as it was *experienced*, the scarcity possessed a linguistic and figurative power that gets appropriated, I would argue, not just thematically in texts of the period, but also figuratively: hunger and anger become powerfully associated in a way that has revolutionary potential rather than as an intelligible part of a ritual of the moral economy of provision.

The harvest failures of the late 1790s capped off a century that had seen fairly stable climate, at least in England (Behringer 157). During the eighteenth century, the price of wheat remained fairly low, so that even the poorest could afford fine white bread, and this article replaced brown bread as the staple choice of poor families. Signs of a scarcity spread across the country in late summer 1795: shortages in many markets, rising prices of all food items, rumors of forestalling, hoarding, speculating and other market cheating, and food riots. Since these signs of crisis coincided with the war with France, whose Revolution itself was arguably spurred by food shortages, the situation was greeted by authorities with more than the usual amount of anxiety.<sup>1</sup> The disturbances of 1795 led local and Parliamentary authorities to develop a number of conservation initiatives, as well as longer-term measures to increase the food supply. Perhaps most significant of these latter, in terms of their long-term impact on English life, was the increase in the rate of land enclosure, which officials at the Board of Agriculture argued would increase the amount of cultivatable land, thereby increasing food production. The Board also promoted dietary reform initiatives like wheat substitutes for bread, and the cultivation of potatoes. In the magazine, *Annals of Agriculture*, edited by Arthur Young,

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<sup>1</sup> For background on the English food crisis, see Bohstedt; Thompson; Wells.

and in other publications, the organization reported on scarcity conditions and relief efforts across the country, drawing on an extensive network of correspondents.

In the print discourse on scarcity, authors approached the subject from numerous perspectives: political, economic, agricultural, sometimes belletristic.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, this was a debate about climate as much as agriculture and political economy, with the core question being whether the scarcity conditions were “real” (caused by weather) or “artificial” (caused by market frauds or wartime exportation or luxury consumption). Commentators on the crisis—who consisted of farmers, clergymen, butchers, government officials, radicals, poets, journalists, random anonymous or pseudonymous members of the public—sought to theorize the disquieting intersection of natural finitude and human needs in the years before Malthus theorized that relationship as catastrophe.

As E.P. Thompson, and more recently, David Collings and John Bohstedt, have shown, one of the time-honored means through which populations affected changes in local subsistence conditions was the food riot, a longstanding practice of the moral economy, whose terms were mutually understood by all parties. It was, according to Thompson, “a highly complex form of direct popular action, disciplined and with clear objectives” (Thompson 188).<sup>3</sup> These riots took many forms, with the crowd’s actions generally consisting of the interception of transport networks, price-fixing, storming of

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<sup>2</sup> The most well-known of the belletristic contributions inspired by the scarcity include Hannah More’s *Cheap Repository Tracts*, Samuel Jackson Pratt’s *Bread; or the Poor*, and Wordsworth’s *The Ruined Cottage*. Coleridge’s lectures in Bristol often turned to matters relating to agriculture and the Corn Laws, and he also co-authored with Thomas Poole the “Letters on Monopolists and Farmers” to the *Morning Post* in 1800. Sub-issues generated by the scarcity in flour, such as the hair powder tax, also inspired some excellent satire. See Peter Pindar’s “Hair Powder: A Plaintive Epistle to William Pitt.”

<sup>3</sup> In Bohstedt’s account, provision politics are defined as “the physical struggle over bread and breadstuffs—igniting into riots and armed repression, but often enough winning relief supplies over food” (1). Bohstedt’s critique of Thompson hinges on a number of issues. Contra Thompson, he argues that hunger (the “law of necessity”) did give some warrant to the crowd’s actions. He also argues that political calculation, and the kinds of community networks available to rioters affected their decision to riot or not. Finally, he quibbles with Thompson’s identification of the moral economy more or less exclusively with old-style paternalism (1-15).

granaries, or pressuring of farmers.<sup>4</sup> In Collings' more recent treatment, the food riot constituted an important and often effective mode of plebeian reversibility, wherein the crowd could express its displeasure with its leaders whom it deemed to be disregarding the laws and customary practices connected with provision. The food riot was the expression through which plebeians could call on authorities to reverse course and obey the laws. The crowd "takes action not to change the law or alter its place within the institutions of power but to maintain a version of reciprocity which it assumes has served and will continue to serve as a collective norm, deploying a power it already possesses to interpret and enforce its notion of this norm" (57). This notion of "reciprocity" is an important one when considering provision politics, as it assumes food access as a matter of customary protocols. This is not to say, of course, that people did not go hungry under the moral economy, or that before the eighteenth century, "every rood of ground maintained its man," as Goldsmith wrote (and as many 1790s scarcity writers nostalgically echoed). Rather, it is to suggest that certain practices of the moral economy engaged scarcity as if it could be rectified or modified by human intervention. Even if that scarcity is ultimately caused by natural conditions, food rioters' actions suggest "that common right ultimately trumps concerns for the scarcity of goods" (Collings 48).<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, by insisting that provisions be sold at customary prices, rioters were

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<sup>4</sup> See Bohstedt's riot census data, compiled at <http://web.utk.edu/~bohstedt/> as a companion to his book, *The Politics of Provision*.

<sup>5</sup> Collings suggestively goes on to contrast the food riot with the logic of carnival, which ultimately denies scarcity altogether: "If the food riot reveals the defiance of legitimate power, carnival defies the sway of nature; it claims a counterpower to contest everything that keeps people from living in such plenty forever, voicing *a cosmic protest against a biological definition of life*, against a world shaped by the logic of need" (48, italics in original). Inasmuch as a great deal of scarcity literature denied the reality of scarcity, it might be said to conform to this account of carnival, although for rational ends. Moreover, this carnivalesque, "cosmic protest against a biological definition of life" sounds like Romanticism in its most utopian, aspirational modes.

articulating an economic, rather than an environmental critique of market assumptions about supply and demand.

During the last decade of the eighteenth century, food riots, as well as public commentary on the food crisis itself, are infused with a distinctive revolutionary rhetoric. This is clear in handbills and graffiti that deploy symbolism and images drawn from the French Revolution, such as threats of headless kings and depictions of the guillotine (Wells 144). Thompson cites a piece of ephemera that satirized conservation efforts directed at the poor (specifically the initiatives to substitute bread with potatoes, soup, and rice):

On Swill & Grains you wish the poor to be fed

And underneath the Guillintine [sic] we could wish to see your heads

For I think it is a great shame to serve the poor so –

And I think a few of your heads will make a pretty show. (qtd in Thompson 248)

A radical pamphlet, one of many such, entitled *Rare News for Old England*, uses a similar strategy of parody, and the combination of hunger/anger to convey its message:

It is well known that certain eminent characters in this kingdom place much confidence in the efficacy of a system of *Starvation*...they have found that French *sans-culottes*, as well as American *Rebels*, can live for years, and grow fat upon nothing, or, what was very little better, upon bread made of *rotten wood* and *soap lather*, and soup of old hats and shoes... (1)

With the temporal proximity of food crisis to the war and to radical agitation for reform, it became possible to link the crowd's riotous behavior with revolutionary activity. While English democratic leaders had larger reformist aims than those connected with

provision, and they generally discouraged violent and riotous behavior, by 1795, they also “were fully aware that famine was the universal topic, it was *the one* which could be exploited with maximum effect” (Wells 143). Thus, the huge gathering sponsored by the London Corresponding Society in St. George’s Field in June of 1795 was so successful largely because of fears of famine had galvanized the public to demonstrate. The threat of famine was framed by the LCS as the result of war and disenfranchisement, not as the result of poor harvests due to bad weather. As John Gale Jones exhorted the crowd on that day:

You will not much longer permit your Fellow-Citizens to be dragged from their peaceful occupations to fight against the Liberties of Mankind, nor suffer your Wives and Children to be robbed of that scanty loaf, which, instead of preserving them from starving, is sent to feed subsidized Cut-throats and foreign Mercenaries! (*Account of the Proceedings* 6)

Michael Scrivener reminds us, following Thompson, that “food rioters acted according to customary notions of moral economy, but the LCS ‘citizens’ made arguments, appealed to evidence, and offered rationalistic validity claims” (39). It is, however, important to note from the quoted passage that scarcity conditions themselves were deployed as powerful evidence for the arguments made by the organization. Jones (and other LCS authors elsewhere) presents the scarcity conditions as part of the range of problems that can be solved by goals of the organization, “UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE AND ANNUAL PARLIAMENTS!” (7). In the months following the demonstration, London and the Home counties remained awash in violence and rumors of violence around the problem of provisions: William Pitt’s Downing street windows were smashed by a crowd who had

come from Charing Cross market; troops were harassed; rumors circulated that crowds were moving to investigate abundant stocks at Kingston-upon-Thames, and even to burn the King's own corn supply kept in Berkshire (Wells 138).

Similarly, the riot that broke out in October 1795 at the opening of Parliament, during which the King's carriage was pelted with rocks, was in large measure a riot over provision. It would be inaccurate to call this a food riot, strictly speaking, since the crowd did not seek to fix prices or seize a stock of provisions to sell at customary prices; however, the grievances that the rioters expressed were intimately bound up with the food crisis. Banners carried by some of those rioters read, "We'd rather be hanged than starved!" (Bohstedt 167). The event spurred the Pitt government to consider various market interventions and Poor Law legislation, but the only measures that passed were the repressive Two Acts in 1795, and in 1800, a disastrous attempt to legislate the baking of brown bread (which was repealed within months).<sup>6</sup> The significance of this moment of urban popular protest, as Bohstedt observes, is that "Provision politics became 'nationalized'" (167).

The contemporary literature on scarcity, I suggest, contributed to this process of nationalization of provision politics, changing the ways in which the food riot was perceived, as we see in the three short texts that I would like to think about and discuss in more detail when we meet. Specifically, I am interested in where the hunger/anger nexus goes in these texts, and what it gets replaced with (figuratively and literally) when that nexus becomes associated with revolutionary violence. Even when food rioting is clearly not part of revolutionary violence, it is interpreted that way, and this perception finds its

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<sup>6</sup> Thompson, in "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd" speculates that Burke's *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* led the government to implement tougher market-based policies during the 1800 scarcity crisis (Thompson 252nn).

way into texts that would have been thought “radical” by contemporary standards. The cancelling of rituals of the moral economy, by conservatives and radicals alike, complicates the account of British romantic politics in ways that have yet to be fully investigated.

**A word about the primary texts:**

Hannah More’s broadside ballad, “The Riot; or half a loaf is better than no bread,” obviously, engages the food situation from an immediate point of view, addressing itself to a readership she imagines would engage in food riots. (The ballad was said to have stopped a food riot near Bath in 1793. This story has been oft repeated, but not verified. Given that food riots were often fairly disciplined affairs, the story is not impossible.)

As an ideological counter-example to More’s ballad, I include a brief passage from a 1795 lecture by radical novelist, poet, lecturer and activist, John Thelwall. The lecture was given in London and republished in *The Tribune* under the provocative title “The PRESENT WAR a principal cause of the STARVING CONDITION of the PEOPLE,” the first of three lectures he gave on the scarcity and high price of provisions. While Thelwall and More were ideological opponents to the extent that the former agitated for Parliamentary reform and was tried for (and acquitted of) high treason, both express a case against the efficacy of food rioting. The convergences in their thinking in this respect ought to give scholars interested in the politics of Romanticism some pause.

I have also selected an unpublished fragment from William Wordsworth entitled “The Baker’s Cart.” This fragment is customarily associated with his poem *The Ruined Cottage*, which itself remained unpublished as such. It is perhaps overstating the case to associate this fragment with food rioting, but critic Kenneth Johnston (rightly, I think) perceives the woman in the passage as “a revolutionary in the making” (480). My interest in this fragment is two-fold: the unmistakable anger that the narrator notes in the woman, and his displacement of her need for real bread in favor of her need for “the common food of hope” – a phrase he uses in the longer poem to describe the tragic heroine’s predicament. I am interested in considering why Wordsworth loads the passage with such revolutionary potential, only to figure it out of existence at the moment when it is expressed.

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